

Letters to the Hot Messes of the World

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

The following paper is an exploration of a young woman's experiences with the dialectic of expectations and reality during college. Life never goes as planned, and often times our human brains cannot comprehend and cope with that fact. This is not an academic or researched piece of writing. It is a flood of thoughts, feelings, experiences, and a lot of honesty. This work does not have a definitive answer to the question: how does one deal with unmet expectations? It is just a college student's journey to maturity and an ability to cope more healthily with reality.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Powell, for believing in me when I couldn't believe in myself, for always laughing at my jokes, and listening to me whenever I needed someone to talk to. But I especially need to thank him for making me feel like my story was worth being told.

I would like to thank my family and friends, for supporting me and motivating me to write even when I would have rather watched Grey's Anatomy or The Office for the one-hundredth time.

I would like to thank my therapist for helping me to write about things I never thought I could put down on paper. It has made me feel so liberated.

I would like to thank my traumas and problems during college. While I wish I never had to deal with them, I know that I would not be who I am today without those experiences.

And finally, I would like to thank my mom for making me into the beautiful hot mess that I am. I wouldn't have had a title for this paper without her calling me, her little curly-headed drama queen of a toddler, a hot mess since 1999.

Process Analysis

Given the title of my thesis, it should be no surprise that my process was a bit of a hot mess. It took a lot of trial-and-error, a lot of crumpled up drafts, and a lot of procrastination and avoidance. While I would have loved to have a well thought out process to explain here, the reality is that I had no idea what I was doing. I wanted to create something that was meaningful that would reflect on my experience at Ball State and provide me with closure. Since I succeeded in that task, it's fair to say that the hot-mess process was functional at the very least.

My initial plan was to write the letters from the perspective of who I was at that specific time. I wrote the first two letters in this style and it felt very ingenuine. I was unable to draw meaning from the events as they were happening in my life, so I had a hard time reflecting on them and analyzing my feelings in a meaningful and sincere way. So, I decided to write from my current prospective, but in separate letters regarding each year. I think that this decision made the work more genuine and therefore more relatable.

My next task was to choose exactly what I wanted to talk about. I found this to be hard because I still wasn't sure what conclusions I was going to draw. Without knowing the direction I wanted to take, it was hard to choose the stories that would take me in that direction. I had plenty of material to work with, I had tons of specific moments that stood out to me, and some broader events that I knew had a big impact on my life. I had at least six or seven things to include in each letter but decided that I wanted to narrow it down to just one or two. I also knew that I wanted each story I told to paint the picture of how different my reality was from my expectations, that way, I could really dig in and process what that contradiction means in regard to my life and happiness. I decided that I would base my conclusions on the different

experiences I chose to write about instead of making the stories fit into a preconceived message. And prayed it would all work out.

Unfortunately, many of the stories and experiences that fit those qualifications were also very traumatic for me. I knew that to write something meaningful I needed to be vulnerable, but that vulnerability made the process extremely difficult. It took a lot for me to write about my experiences during freshman and junior year, in particular. And I had to be patient with myself. While I hated the fact that I was pushing my own deadlines back, I knew that I needed to allow myself the freedom to figure out what I wanted to say. Each event brought out different emotions, and it was important that I had a clear mind for each letter.

The process of taking my time and accepting when I did not meet the deadlines I set for myself, was a growing process within itself. It was another challenge of my expectations going unmet, and I had to cope with it. The problem is, my sudden ability to let it go and come up with a new plan confuses me in that I don't think I could explain how I was able to do that. It's possible that having a global Pandemic put everything but classes and my thesis on hold, helped me a lot. But I think that it was more so something internal that allowed me to take my time and be forgiving with myself.

While it would have been nice to have my thesis done and submitted long before the deadline, I feel that my procrastination was useful in this case. I think that if I had written this before the Pandemic and while I was still at Ball State, going to classes, I would not have been able to reflect as well as I have. I think that having to leave Muncie and Ball State in March allowed me to feel like it really was the end of college and like I could finally look back at the entire experience. I think that the atmosphere of the world I am living in as I write this gave me

a lot of clarity as well – there is a lot of fear and uncertainty across the globe, so with the whole world being a hot mess it was easier for me to open up and find meaning within my struggle.

The other challenge I faced with this project, was that after I had finished putting it all on paper, I had to proof-read and perfect it. This would normally not be such a difficult task, if it weren't for the topics that I had written about. The process of typing my story out was freeing and cathartic, but the process of rereading what I had written was triggering and intense. I had done my best to clean up the spelling and grammar, but as I started removing conjunctions and cuss words I remembered that I wanted this to be real and raw. I wanted the letters to feel as if I was talking to readers over coffee, or as if they were handwritten with parts scratched out and words misspelled. I still wanted the paper to seem intellectual so I cleaned it up here and there but left a lot of things that I would normally change if this was more of an academic paper versus a creative project. I was able to read through the whole thing a few times in order to do so, and that was something that I can be proud of. I felt strength, not only because I had written my story, but because I was able to sit with it and read it again despite how difficult that was.

This creative project was more than just a stepping-stone to graduate, like I initially thought it was. It became something that would help me cope with my experiences and became a way for me to meaningfully close the book on the chapter of my life at Ball State. I have been afraid of my decisions to change my major and complete my nursing education at Loyola University. I have been afraid of carrying the mess of my past with me into my future. And I have been afraid of what the future holds for me. This project allowed me to reflect on some terribly messy parts of my life and realize that they weren't so unbearable. I'm not afraid of what unexpected roadblocks that life throws in my way. But I was also able to see how

detrimental my obsession with my plans and expectations were on my health and happiness.

Even when life took me to my lowest point, I cared about how unfair it was that I didn't get the perfect life or year that I wanted, instead of caring about my current feelings. I think that I have learned to be more realistic in the expectations and goals that I make, and to give myself a little more grace when life doesn't go as planned.

I know that I have grown and matured immensely through the experiences that I talk about in this thesis, but I am also certain that I have grown and matured through the experience of completing my honors thesis as well.

Introduction

Dear Hot Messes of the World,

Are you a hot mess?

I am writing to you, as a fellow hot mess, to share my story. You see, the last 5 years have been an insane twist and turn of events. College did not go as I had planned. Life did not go as planned. That's the thing you always hear – that life is so unexpected. But knowing that doesn't make it any easier when shit hits the fan, does it?

I am talking specifically to other hot messes, because you know what it feels like. You know how hard it can be when you try to get yourself together, and the world scatters it all again. You understand the pain of watching the people around you having the life that you had hoped for and planned. You have felt that isolation when others pity you once they see how much of a mess you are. You get it. Maybe you haven't accepted it or try not to think about it. Maybe you're lost or frustrated. Or maybe life is going pretty good right now, but you feel anxious and worry because you know it can't last for much longer. You might not even be THAT big of a mess. But whoever you are, and wherever you are at in life, know that you're not alone.

The following letters are my reflections on where I was at through the last 5 years. Starting with senior year of high school and ending with senior year of college. I am going to be very REAL with you. My honesty might make you feel uncomfortable, make you laugh, or hopefully make you feel better. I know that I cannot be the only one that feels the way I do, but even if I am, at least this is cathartic. This is not meant to be a sob story. I do not want you to feel sympathy for the things I've gone through. I want you to learn from my mistakes, to take some important life lessons away, and be inspired to persevere through whatever you might be going through – and most importantly, to look at this dialectic of expectations vs reality in real life experiences. Even if no one reads this, I find comfort in the idea that this could help someone someday, even if it is myself in another 5 years.

2016

Dear Hot Messes of the World,

What is college even like?

I would say that my life peaked in high school. While I had stressors and worries, like wanting a date to homecoming or not liking how my hair turned out in the dance team photos, I was pretty happy. I was an overachiever, I was in honors & AP classes, I did summer school and came an hour early to do more electives, I was on the dance team, in choir, the musical, and every honor society imaginable. I was so motivated and worked so hard, and I got great grades. But honestly? Those grades didn't really make me happy. I've been confused for a long time about how I was SO motivated. And unfortunately, I still really don't know the answer for certain, but I have two theories.

The first theory is that I was motivated by the grind itself. I loved taking notes and doing worksheets. I even enjoyed reading the novels for our English classes, though I wouldn't admit it to any of my peers. And I loved the feeling of accomplishment when I stayed up all night because I was so dedicated to finishing my assignments. I'm not saying that the grades I got didn't matter to me, because I did think they mattered and thought that a bad grade would KILL me. But now that I know what failing feels like (stay tuned for later letters, college is hard), I know that failing doesn't feel as bad as I had thought. Turns out your heart doesn't stop beating when you get a grade lower than a B.

I've noticed that, in the same way, good grades don't feel as good as I thought they would. Which I think is true for a lot of things in life. When we think about how a breakup or getting fired will feel, we think it will be this crippling disaster. And we think that once we graduate high school and once we go away to college, life will be great. And honestly? Everything ends up being just alright. What I'm trying to say is that getting good grades didn't motivate me, they were a result of the passion I had for schoolwork.

My other theory for this crazy motivation I had is that I was looking forward to my future. I thought that working my ass off in high school would get me into an amazing school with a huge scholarship, so I wouldn't have to worry about money in college. I thought that going to a sub-par school would mean I would end up having a sub-par life. This view is not the healthiest

or the most realistic, so I don't recommend it. But for my adolescent mind, it was effective for the time being. I was so excited to get through high school, so that I could become this better version of myself in college.

My expectations for college were based on movies and television, and were a beautiful image made of little hopes and ideas:

- I'd go to a well-known university with beautiful old buildings, but with a modern and clean feeling. A nice quad that I could sit and read in would be ideal. And the walk across campus wouldn't be too crazy – I wanted it to feel like a small school physically but a big school socially and in reputation. Most importantly, I wanted to be far enough away from my family so that I could get a real fresh start and not come home all the time like my sister had done.
 - o Ball State met most of my qualifications. I had to compromise in the reputation area, because I honestly never heard of the school before. I knew that as a graduate, there would be a good chance I would tell someone I went to Ball State and they would say "where?" But it had a quad with old buildings, a lot of newer modern buildings. And it was the perfect size and distance from home.
- I wanted to major in something important. I want to make money out of college, and not be a dead-beat without a job like my older brother. So I guess I'll double major in Spanish and Business, because that sounds smart and important and something that boss ladies in power-suits major in. And of course I would be in the honors college, because I've been in honors since elementary school.
 - o I ended up changing my major within the first few months at Ball State, and almost dropped the honors college a few different times... but we will get to all that later.
- I was going to rush a sorority. I didn't make the dance team, which was a huge blow to my pride, and I was so used to the feeling of being a part of something at school. A big part of my identity in high school was that I was on the dance team. I would wear my uniform on Fridays during football season with so much pride and confidence. It made me feel important. So why not trade the sparkly uniform for a pair of Greek letters? I

wouldn't party too much, but I would have a group of lifelong friends in my sorority. I was tired of being a floater in high school, not having a friend group and not having plans all the time. So I would make friends with frat guys too, so I would always have some kind of plans no matter what.

- I did rush, and it was an amazing decision, but for so many other reasons than I had thought when I was 18. Sadly, I didn't have the ideal sorority experience, I didn't find "my future bridesmaids" in my sorority. I grew close with a handful of amazing women, but I didn't have a friend group like I had craved for so long. I probably spent just as much time having FOMO (fear of missing out) as I did in high school. And I did not make friends with many frat guys. What I did get was a large group of women who were there for me when I needed them. At least with my experience in my chapter, I didn't have to be super close with a girl for her to be there for me if I needed help or advice. They were a support system that I relied on through all the hard times that you'll read about. Although it wasn't the experience I thought I wanted to get from being a sorority woman, I wouldn't want it any other way.
- I would get a boyfriend. I had stayed single for all of senior year because I knew we would be leaving for college, and I wanted to have "fun." That backfired because I ended up without a prom date, and instead of getting a cute promposal like other high school girls, I prom-posed to a guy named Alex who was in choir and the musical with me. (I actually got a lot of positive feedback from my peers and the community because Alex has special needs, but honestly I didn't do it for the clout, I did it because he is so nice and funny, and I knew he would be so excited and that it was a definite "yes"). But now it was my time to have the perfect romance in college. I would spend a little time continuing my "hoe phase" but there would be a frat guy or baseball player who would notice me intently studying in the library or playfully laughing with my friends at a party. And we would fall in love, and he would take care of me when I got too drunk, and I would study while he played videogames, and we would be frickin' #goals.

- I'm laughing to myself as I write this, because I never even came close to this happening. My "hoe phase" is still going on – I never deleted my tinder or bumble accounts since I made them freshman year. I would snapchat like 3-8 guys at a time, and maybe hookup with 1 or 2 of them. Eventually I would get bored of them, or I would fall for one until he hit me with a "hey I'm actually talking to someone else now and I'm gonna see how that goes lol sorry" and/or ghost me. Sometimes it upset me, but no matter what, I bounced back with finding a replacement. I never had anyone NOTICE ME, I always found them. I never was #goals, except to my other single friends who supported me being more of a player than even the hottest frat guy or football player on campus.
- The last "expectation" wasn't really something I thought or dreamt about, it wasn't even a goal honestly because I would obviously get good grades and be on the Dean's list.
 - As I referenced earlier, I failed an exam for the first time ever in my life during college. And the second time, and the third time. I even withdrew from 3 classes because I was going to fail. I went from being an Illinois State Scholar with a 4.37 GPA to a student that prayed to just PASS.

So I guess the point of me telling you all of this is to give you more of a background, to introduce myself a little more, and to paint a picture of what my expectations for the 4 years of college would look like so that you can keep that in mind when you read how it all really went.

2016-2017

Dear Hot Messes of the World,

Life gets messy, it'll only get messier.

When I say that shit hit the fan early in my college career, I mean it. Things started to change before I even got to Ball State in Fall of 2016.

I was enjoying my summer before college, being a regular 18-year-old, having fun with my high school friends, sharing a graduation party with Nicole (my sister who just graduated from Northern Illinois University), working at my high school job as a hostess at Aurelio's, only dreaming of what I wanted my dorm to look like based on Pinterest instead of buying anything because I had plenty of time. Life was good. I had plenty of time, and life was good.

I vividly remember the day that it all changed. I had been listening to old Taylor Swift and decided that day to make the switch to old Jesse McCartney, songs I used to jam out to when I was younger when my older sister would drive me around to school and dance classes. I needed to mow the lawn that day, because my 25-year-old brother is supposed to since he lives here rent free but never does. I was excited to spend the afternoon with my family outside; we were going to swim in our backyard pool and my mom would make dinner on the grill. I remember we were going to make my summertime favorite, grilled chicken with grilled veggies and potatoes on the side – my mom wraps them in foil, so they turn out super crispy and delicious. It was gonna be a summer night like when I was little, where we are all in the pool having a good time and when dinner's ready we sit in our wet suits wrapped in towels at our patio table, and then when we are done we jump back in. It had been a long time since we had a day or night like that, and they were my favorite growing up, so I was very excited and happy. My sister had been not feeling good, she had another sinus infection or something, but she has had those for years because she had a deviated septum that she had surgery on. So migraines were not uncommon for her. Except the night before she was dizzy and threw up on her bedroom floor, which is really weird because she NEVER throws up. But she's my big sister, and she loves making me happy and helps me when I want to do something like have our family spend time outside together, so I wasn't too worried. It was going to be a great day, I was listening to Jesse McCartney and doing yardwork, and then we'd all have fun together.

Actually, when Nikki finally woke up, she was even more dizzy and almost threw up again. I ran to the bathroom to check on her, my dad following behind me. I knew something was wrong the second I looked at her, but I had no idea what was to come. My mom had to go grocery shopping for the stuff for dinner, so she was a little annoyed when my dad and I said we think Nikki needed to go to the ER. Eventually, mom fixed her hair and dad got dressed, and they took her to the hospital and left me at home to do my chores while Max went for the groceries.

It took forever. I was so annoyed that once again, something was getting in the way of my plans. I wanted to have this fun day, and it got ruined. I finished mowing the lawn and then cooled off in the pool. I dried off and went inside to prep for dinner a little bit, and then returned to our pool deck with my Bluetooth speaker playing Jesse McCartney while I tanned. I was trying to think positive thoughts and not get mad about the day not going how I wanted it to. Until I got a call from my mom. Everything still seemed fine, they just needed me to bring sandwiches since it was getting to be past dinnertime and they were hungry. I threw on a tank top and shorts over my swimming suit and picked up Jimmy Johns because it was on the way. I can vividly remember driving to the hospital with the windows down, singing along to old Jesse McCartney like it was yesterday.

The most vivid memory though, is when my parents came out to the parking lot to meet me. I thought, “that’s so weird, I could just meet one of them in the lobby.” Within seconds, it hit me that something was wrong. I froze. Mom said eight words I will never forget, “they found a mass in your sister’s brain.” I dropped the bag with the sandwiches. I didn’t cry. I didn’t really react. I just stood there. In the middle of the parking lot, feeling like the world was spinning around me. I knew that this was terrible news, but I could never have imagined what was ahead.

I remember sitting there in the lobby with my parents while they did more tests. I was freezing cold. I knew hospitals are always cold, but I just wore my tank top and shorts over a wet swimsuit because I was only dropping off food. I remember finally starting to cry, and then it gets a little blurry. Someone ended up giving me a sweatshirt, or maybe I ran back home.

Nikki was admitted and got a room upstairs in the ICU. The nurses and doctors were nice, but we weren't getting a lot of answers. Some called it a mass, others a cyst. And once an oncologist came for a consult, I knew what it really was – not a mass or a cyst, but a tumor. A tumor the size of a lemon was in my big sister's left frontal lobe, pressing on her brain. I remember going down to the hospital's chapel and sobbing. My brother found me and sat with me even though he gave up believing in God a long time ago. Honestly, at that moment I was ready to give up on believing too. How could this happen? My sister is the kindest and most selfless human in the whole world. She never did anything wrong, never sinned. Sure, she doesn't have a lot of friends, but she's happy that way so who cares. It wasn't fair. This wasn't supposed to happen. And how did God let this happen?

She was moved to Northwestern in downtown Chicago and had to have brain surgery. I remember my mom and I driving behind the ambulance transferring her. My mom worried about losing the ambulance in the Chicago traffic, and my sister's favorite song "Can't Stop the Feeling" by Justin Timberlake coming on the radio. We sang and danced along to the song, it was a surreal moment because we were also crying and thinking that we may never enjoy this song with Nikki again.

Northwestern is a gorgeous hospital, but it is still a hospital so spending a whole week there is not ideal. I remember I slept in so many chairs in waiting rooms that week. Sometimes, the nurses would let me, or my mom, stay in the pull-out couch in Nikki's room, even though she was an adult and wasn't supposed to have visitors overnight. They'd even steal us a few blankets or pillows, especially if we had to sleep in the lobby. I remember that if I got to stay in her room with her overnight, I couldn't leave and come back in because the cameras at the unit's entrance would pick it up and the nurses could get in trouble for letting me back in. I think about those nurses a lot because why would they risk getting in trouble for us? I think it's because they knew that our family was going through something unimaginable, and something as simple as being close to Nikki comforted us more than anything or anyone could.

Time stood still during her surgery. I was hopelessly optimistic and deep in denial. I remember sitting in the waiting area for surgeries. It had monitors on the wall across from a bunch of windows, that had numbers of each patient and a memo that said where they were at

in surgery. My parents had written Nikki's number down, but I didn't need it – I miraculously had photographic memory for that single moment in my life. I checked that screen more times than is probably normal. Not out of fear, but anticipation. Because I was CERTAIN that my sister was going to come out of surgery alive and well. My uncle that lives in New York flew in, so it seemed like everyone else did not think the same thing. Everyone thought she was going to die. They pretended to be positive too, but I could feel the weight of the silence. That silence is what made time stand still.

Her surgery was a success. The surgeon said that because of where they operated, it was likely that her personality would not be the same, but she would be alive. He said that with the kind of tumor it was, he got everything he saw, but there was likely to be more cells left behind, so she would see an oncologist to proceed with care. I remember looking at this man, this surgeon, this guy who had his hands inside my sister's head (not exactly how brain surgery works, but for imagery purposes), and I thought he might be God. Okay, maybe not God but sent by Him or something. He had this Morgan Freeman voice and he just saved my sister's life, and I was in awe.

I remember the first second I got to see her. There was my beautiful big sister, with staples in her head where they shaved her hair right along her left hairline, and this red ball attached to this red tube that went into the top of her skull. I've been exposed to a lot of health-care stuff with other family illnesses, and with my mom being a nurse, but what the heck was that ball? It was so gross looking, but I just smiled and acted like it wasn't even there, so she wouldn't get scared. I remember she smiled and said, "Hi, bunny" and then went right back to sleep.

It was a long week with her in the hospitals. Someone was always with her at the hospital at all times. My parents took turns, and I went home with one of them once in a while to shower and change my clothes. But the night before she got discharged, my parents had to come home to get the house ready and clean and sanitize. We didn't want an extra car there, so my brother was supposed to drive me in the morning before he went to work. He didn't wake up in time and was having a manic episode again. He's bipolar and was not handling any of this well. He was worried about if it was genetic and if he would get it too. He freaked out

when he saw the drain (the red ball) and scared Nikki. He cried when she spit out her hospital food, because the nurses said she needed to start eating before she could go home. He was a mess. And he was crying and screaming at me because he couldn't take me to the hospital. I looked up the train times and there was one that was leaving in 5 minutes.

I scooped up the stuff I had to take – a change of clothes for her, a prayer blanket that a friend made with her church friends, my purse, and her favorite penguin stuffed animal – ran to the car, parked in the street where I knew I could get a ticket eventually but I had no time to find a spot, and got into the train JUST in time. It was Lollapalooza weekend, so everyone I went to high school with was on the train. A few of them noticed me but saw I was crying and didn't approach. I remember thinking "I used to be carefree and having fun like that, and now I have to be responsible and get to the hospital and take care of my sister." I remember having to hail my first cab by myself because the train station was too far from the hospital for me to walk with all that stuff. I remember almost getting lost in the hospital trying to find the right wing because I hadn't come in from the street before. But mostly, I remember the feeling the night when my sister and I were tucked in, her in the hospital bed, me in a recliner chair; the nurses asked if we needed anything and my sister told them "no we're okay, this is my little Bunny and I'll take care of her, don't worry." Even after having freaking brain surgery, my sister was going to take care of me.

After we got her home, a lot of things changed. I had a lot of random people from high school reach out to me. We had tons of people sending fruit baskets and telling us they're praying for us. It was so weird, because my sister was still pretty much the same. Her personality wasn't really affected; if anything, she liked people more now which isn't a bad thing at all and now she gave hugs. She was still Nicole – same voice, same mannerisms, same opinions – just with a hole in her skull where the tumor was and a few staples in her head.

We learned that it was a glioblastoma brain tumor, which is very rare, even more rare in someone under 65 years of age. I remember sitting there in the doctor's office downtown, with my mini notepad writing everything down so my parents could focus on just listening. The doctor asked if we had any questions and my mom had a few and then there was a pause. I remember looking up from the notepad and asking "so nobody has said the actual word yet,

and I'm pretty sure it's because they don't want to scare us, but if it is what it is I need to know for sure, I need a doctor to say it so that I believe it," another silent pause as I took a breath, "does my sister have cancer?" And then as the doctor looked at me with a sad look and possibly some tears in his eyes, he was getting ready to nod his head "yes" when my sister said "Cassie, pay attention. They took it out so if anything I HAD cancer." We all kind of looked at her and chuckled. Nicole was handling this all so well – she never really got mad or sad, she was a little scared before surgery, but then she just accepted it. She said that she could've been hit by a bus, so this is better.

The plan for treatment was kind of confusing and had a lot of options. They would do radiation and chemo so that they could kill off any remaining cells. The doctor told us that unfortunately, the type of cancer that Nicole has is likely to come back, but because it is so rare and even more rare for someone so young, they have no clue when that will be. Once again I needed some kind of answer, so I could be prepared and the doctor answered that with most cases he's seen, the cancer comes back in either a few months or 5 years. It's a scary thought, that the sister who was going to be by my side through life, could be gone in 5 years instead of 50. We couldn't focus on that, we had to be positive and focus on taking care of her and pray that the treatments work, so we get years instead of months. We got a lot of information about the exact treatment options, and I took notes knowing that all of that would start in a few weeks, after I left for school. Oh shit, college. That was still a thing.

I didn't want to go to Ball State anymore. It was too far. I wouldn't be able to come home enough. Everything that I thought was going to be important to me during college had changed. I had wanted a school far away, and now I wanted to be close to my sister. I couldn't wait to get out of my parents' house and now I wanted to just stay home. I started to regret not looking at any closer schools. My family encouraged me to still go to Ball State, but it wasn't until my sister told me that "you can't put your life on hold for me" that I finally accepted it – I would still go to Ball State. And move-in day was quickly approaching. I went from having plenty of time and lots of ideas of how I wanted my dorm to look, to having like a week to scramble to find essentials.

When I pictured freshman year move-in to college, I pictured it like the movies. My parents would drive me and my stuff down, my dad would put stuff together, my mom would help me put my clothes away and decorate, and then they'd take me to dinner and then we'd have this bittersweet goodbye. Well, after taking a bunch of time off to be in the hospitals with my sister, my dad couldn't take any more time off from work, so he couldn't come anymore. My sister wanted to come with, so that really changed the vibe of the day. I had to bring my stuff in by myself while my mom and sister sat in the car. My sister was really tired, so my mom took her to a hotel room, and they napped while I unpacked. My roommate wasn't there so I was by myself trying to loft my bed, wishing my dad was with me, and crying. My best friend from high school, Riley, surprised me with her dad to help me move in because of everything my family had going on. So they came just in time to help me with the bed. It was still a good day and was fun, but it definitely was not how I thought it would be.

I didn't get that picture with my parents of them "dropping me off at college" that my brother and sister had. And I felt so selfish for being upset that I didn't get what I wanted. I mean, for the love of god, my sister has brain cancer and I'm gonna cry that my daddy isn't here to help me move into my dorm? I felt like I didn't have a right to be sad that the reality of that day wasn't what I wanted or expected. And that made me cry even more, because on top of being mad that it all sucked I made myself feel guilty on top of it. What I know now, though, is that you have a right to feel whatever you feel. But you can't let that feeling control you. There's a difference between a feeling and an attitude. A feeling is brief and fleeting, you get over a feeling. An attitude can influence an entire day, week, even a year. You can let yourself feel, but then you have to get over it and not let it affect your attitude.

I tried to not let everything affect me. I tried to carry on and act like nothing was really different. But it was different, and I was a different person. No matter how hard I tried to be the same peppy Cassie, super positive and motivated, it was all fake. Everything changed, and I should have embraced the change in a healthier way and adapted my expectations for life. But instead, I acted like everything was the same and life would go on just how I planned.

Eventually I become more and more unhappy. I would tell myself I was happy. I would go out to parties on the weekends and feel dead inside the whole time. I would hang out with

friends and just wished I was with my family instead. The thing with unhappiness is that it's hard to know what will fix it, especially while you are in the middle of being unhappy. You feel stuck and there's nothing that will help you. So you just take a guess and try to find what works.

I decided that it was my major that was making me unhappy. Even though I was doing well in my classes, I decided to change my major to nursing in the first semester of freshman year. People warned me that it would be hard, but I was smart so I would be fine. My mom is a nurse, a great nurse. I used to not want to be like her because she told work stories that sometimes grossed me out. I denied that I loved making people feel better because I knew I was a little squeamish with certain things. I had volunteered during high school at my mom's hospital, and at 16 years old started a friendly visitor program so that patients over 65 wouldn't get confused or depressed if they didn't have family visiting them. I even had a toy nurse's cart when I was little that I would wheel around when anyone in my family was sick, I'd stock it with crackers and Gatorade and give them hugs to make them better. There were so many signs that I wanted to be a nurse, but it wasn't until I saw how the nurses not only made my sister feel better, but how they took care of our whole family. That's the kind of difference I wanted to make in the world, the kind of impact that would make student loans and lots of hard work in college worth it. So I was going to make it work, and I was going to be a nurse just like my mom.

When second semester brought on too many credit hours and lots of chemistry and biology homework that I struggled through so that I could catch up with other nursing majors, I made excuses for why it was so hard. "I just have a lot on my plate," "I'll do better next semester when I'm less stressed," "These classes are harder because they are all science, and nursing classes will be more critical thinking which I'm good at." Spoiler alert: Nursing school was even worse. But that's a story for a different day...

2017-2018

Dear Hot Messes of the World,

It doesn't always get better after freshman year.

If someone asked me what lessons I learned during college, I would have some various pieces of wisdom to preach, but I would also tell them that I learned that nursing school is ruthless. Most other majors and departments are pretty lenient and chill. You might mess up an exam and your professor will let you retake it. You might get an extension on an assignment because you're having a rough week. You might have a class cancelled every now and then or have assignments and attendance that are optional. Not nursing school. I switched my major without really understanding what nursing school entails.

There are some facts about the nursing program that I wished I would have known. I don't think it would have really changed my mind about the major, but it would've been nice to have some more warning. People warned me that it was hard, but they didn't explain why. So, just in case you're reading this and are considering the nursing profession or have any curiosity regarding the subject, then please read the following list. But if not, feel free to skip ahead.

- You can't have your nails painted or have visible tattoos.
- For every nursing class you take, you have a lecture portion and a "lab" or clinical.
 - o That might not seem so bad, because that's how bio and chem were. But you are wrong. Clinicals are 8+ hours long, and lectures are longer and more confusing than other classes. You will do hours of preparation for your clinicals, and you won't get any points for it.
 - o You can only pass a class if you pass the lecture portion and meet all the requirements for clinical.
 - Your grade for lecture is more complicated than you think. You'll have assignments and projects, but they don't matter unless you have a passing exam average. So there is no wiggle room.
 - Actually, there's no wiggle room in nursing school period.
- The grading scale is crazy.

- A 78 is a C – and is the lowest grade you can get. An 82 is a C+, 85 a B-. An 89 is just a B, and a 91 is just a B+. A 94 is an A-, and 95-100 is an A.
- This system is toxic because it makes a lot of hard, hard work seem like nothing. It makes someone who is intelligent and knowledgeable feel mediocre. And it puts an obscene amount of pressure on students, that can be crippling.
- Out of all the required classes in the program, you can fail and retake a class only one time. So if you fail one class, retake it and move onto the next, you cannot fail another class.
 - But, you can withdraw from a class and retake it as many times as you like. The only penalty being that you cannot progress to the next semester in the program until you pass that class – pushing you back an entire semester.

I'm not trying to bash Ball State's nursing program. I am sure that they educate plenty of highly qualified nurses, and therefore it is a great program. But if you are someone with a disability or with a life that's a mess, you will fall through the cracks.

Sophomore year, I had to withdraw from my intro to nursing class. I had written in my planner that the first exam closed at midnight on Friday, because that's when everything was due in the class and that only made sense. Well the exam closed at 5pm on that Friday. I remember freaking out and crying, because I just messed up and "what am I going to do?" There was nothing to do. The professor said it wouldn't be fair to let me take the exam, and that missing an exam meant that my average would not be passing even if I got 100% on the rest of the exams. So I would automatically fail. I made the decision to withdraw from the class and retake it in the spring. This would put me behind a semester, but I could make it up during the summer sometime. I'm not gonna lie, it did suck. It did feel like the end of the world at that time. But I got over it. I learned my lesson, and I was going to do better.... So I thought.

My second year at Ball State wasn't just about nursing school, it was also the year when I started worrying that I wasn't making enough friends. Freshman year, I had become best friends with a girl in my sorority who was in the Honors College with me. She was from Muncie and would take me off campus to Puerto's (a Mexican restaurant that is a Muncie classic). We were inseparable. She helped me through so much of the stuff that was going on in my life, and

I was so grateful and really valued our friendship. I figured that this was the lifelong friend that people talk about finding in college – my future maid of honor, my future child’s godmother, my ride or die. I wanted a friend group, but I was fine with having at least the one ride or die best friend.

Over the summer, we didn’t text as much, so we weren’t quite as close, but we did update each other once in a while. She started dating another Muncie local who had gone to another Indiana school and was transferring to BSU. I was excited for her and followed him on Instagram after she posted a pic with him. I did all the supportive friend stuff. After summer ended and we came back for Sophomore year, things were different. She was very short-tempered with me, she seemed like she had lost interest in being my friend. I noticed something was off, but this was my best friend, so I would have never imagined what would happen next.

My best friend ended her relationship a few weeks into the fall semester when she learned that he lied about why he transferred – he was accused of rape at the last school. She believed him that the rape accusation was false, but the fact that he kept it from her was unforgivable. With her mindset of “he lied to me, and I don’t need the drama right now, so it’s over and I don’t want to hear what he has to say or talk about it anymore,” I didn’t get a lot of information about the whole situation. This was not the first time that she cut someone out of her life in the year that I had known her, so I did not think much of it. I was just happy to be back at Ball State with my best friend.

A week or two into the semester, I had seven random guys adding me on Snapchat “by username” which confused and worried me because I had not given my username out to anyone. I recognized one of them, it was him – the guy my best friend dated and just dumped. I figured it would be safe just to add him back to ask where he got it, since his was the only name I recognized. He gave me a really weird answer that he got it from some guys at a fraternity he was rushing, but I didn’t know anyone at that fraternity. It was all pretty sketchy, and I was just going to let it go and never talk to him again.

Except he kept messaging me. He asked, “did you hear about the breakup?” and I said, “I know you broke up, but that’s all.” Then he started saying some scary stuff like “I just want to

die,” “I’m going to drink until I’m numb,” “I don’t have a reason to live.” I had no interest in talking to this guy, but no matter who you are or what you’ve done in the past, I will never feel comfortable ignoring someone that might be in danger of hurting themselves. So, I kept talking to him. Telling him about resources for him to get help, I even found the suicide hotline for him. I was just trying to make sure he didn’t hurt himself; I wasn’t trying to be his friend or anything more.

The conversation gradually got inappropriate. He would hit on me and I would tell him it wasn’t okay. He would apologize, just to do it again a few minutes later. I realized that he was manipulating me and told him if he didn’t feel safe with his own thoughts he could talk to me, otherwise stop messaging me. That made it worse, he sent me things that felt very violating and uncomfortable – offering to pay me for sex, telling me that while he dated my best friend he would masturbate to my Instagram – I blocked him, and it was over.

The next day I told my friend because that felt like the right thing to do. She was so angry with me. Blaming me for the situation, asking me why I talked to him in the first place. She was so upset and hurt, that she basically ghosted me. She wanted nothing to do with me, didn’t want to talk about it, it was just over.

Initially, the whole situation left me upset because I knew why she was hurt by him, but I was only trying to a) find out who’s giving my snapchat username to random people and then b) be a decent human and help someone who seemed to want to end their life. But then, I was really more upset that someone who meant so much to me could drop me in a blink of an eye. I felt like my freshman year and all the memories we made and time we spent together was a huge waste. I felt isolated in my sorority, because she decided who I could be friends with other than her. I spent tons of money that first year going to lunch and dinner with her 3-4 times a week. I felt used and abandoned, like I was a temporary friend when I thought I was a forever friend. This was not how college was supposed to be.

I’ve grown apart from friends gradually before. But I had never had a friend just leave. I was worried if this would keep happening, or if I would be able to make any more friends. I felt like a loser, because for a lot of that semester I didn’t have plans and didn’t have anyone to hang out with. But when I got my “little” everything changed, and I had a new lifelong best

friend and we were inseparable. Until we weren't again junior year when we fought and grew apart, still friends but not as close as we had been.

The problem with having one best friend that you are inseparable from is that it is isolating. I have never been good at becoming part of a friend group. I always ended up with 1 or 2 best friends, who usually weren't friends with one another for some reason. I felt like a loser because I didn't have a friend group. Because I didn't have the social life that I thought I would have in college, I felt like a failure and that I could never be happy. I felt like I had to make a friend that would be my friend throughout my life, because my sister was dying, and I would be alone. I wasn't finding a boyfriend, a best friend, and I was going to lose my sister. And the fear of being on my own in life was paralyzing.

I wish I had more wisdom on this matter. I wish I had more answers, and more of a resolution for you. I'm still worried about being alone, but I don't let it cripple me. I've reached out to older friendships and that has strengthened me. I realized that having your ride or die best friend is not the worst thing in the world. But there are still times that I have friend group FOMO. I'm not sure if you relate to any of this, but if you do, know that it is okay. It is okay to feel sad when your plans for your birthday aren't what you expected because barely anyone shows up. It is okay to want to have more friends and crave the feeling of being part of a group. It is okay. But what is not okay is to take the friends and healthy relationships you have for granted. Lean more into the friends you do have, and you might be pleasantly surprised.

One important lesson that I learned is that, just like with other things in life like money and success, having more friends or a "better" social life, doesn't necessarily make you happier. I used to be jealous of the girls in my sorority who had their ride or die group of 4-5 girls, until I realized how isolating that could be. I used to hate being a floater, but now I like to think about how I don't have to always hang out with the same group of people every weekend, I have a broader array of people that can fill my heart. Some people might think that I'm lucky to have around 50 people that I could text just to chat and check in, instead of having a group message with 5 people who sometimes fight.

Our human brains like to idealize what we don't have or what we wanted to have. We idealize the expectations that we had for our life. But most importantly we exaggerate the terribleness of not meeting those expectations. We tend to forget to notice the good in our reality, only focusing on it not being the reality that we wanted. I do the same thing to this day, so I'm not trying to preach like I'm a perfect person. But try to remember this: when the conflict between expectations vs reality are hurting you, you can try to flip the script. Try idealizing your reality, instead of idealizing the expectations, and it might just help.

2018-2019

Dear Hot Messes of the World,

It's okay to not be okay.

I told you before that shit hit the fan early in college. Which it did, and then kind of levelled out. My sister was doing okay, and things were alright. I had some anxiety and depression about being lonely and/or stressed about nursing school, but I was closer to my baseline. Well, the whole world hit the fan for me Junior year of college.

You might have heard about that false invincibility that teenagers and young adults have – the “that will never happen to me” mentality. That feeling only got stronger for me when my sister was diagnosed with brain cancer. I thought, “I already have a sister with brain cancer, life couldn’t get any worse from here.” Boy oh boy, was I wrong. Junior Year was a year of some of the lowest lows and the highest highs I’ve ever had. And the impact of the lows continued to affect me for another year and might affect me for the rest of my life.

The fall semester was going pretty well. I liked living in a house off campus and quickly became close with my housemates. I was doing pretty well in nursing school - my clinical group didn’t really like me, but I was getting good grades and was enjoying working with the elderly population in the nursing home for clinicals, so it was fine. And despite the two major things that happened at the end of the fall semester, I finished it out strong academically.

I remember it was a Thursday night in November, I did not have clinical the next day like usual, so I was starting to study for an exam I had the following week. I was reading my nursing textbook, highlighting and making flashcards. Nikki texted me asking me if I had eaten dinner, which wasn’t all that weird because I tend to forget to feed myself and my sister and parents frequently check in on me like that. I texted back, “no, I’ll make myself a sandwich or something in a few minutes.” She texted me back, “no, wait.” Then I got a call from my mom. She said, “hey come unlock your back door, your father really has to pee.” I was so confused. My parents didn’t tell me they were driving the four hours to Muncie, and I didn’t understand why they would in the first place.

Once I opened the door, I knew that something was wrong. I asked my mom what was happening while my dad went to the bathroom. She told me we should go to my room to talk.

As we walked up stairs, I asked her “Is it Nikki?” no, “is it GG?” no, “Grandma?” no, “Max?” no, “then who the heck is it?” she paused. We got to my room and she asked what I had going on with assignments and classes tomorrow and the weekend. When my dad got to my room, he sat on my bed with me and put his arm around my shoulders. My mom said the words, “It’s your cousin, Kurtis. They found him yesterday.” I waited and took forever to ask, “what do you mean? Was he missing?” My dad answered with, “well kind of honey, he killed himself.”

My cousins and I were never insanely close like in some other families. We’d see each other on holidays and some birthdays, but that was about all. I’m the youngest cousin by about 3 years, so I was usually excluded because I was “too little.” My cousin Kurtis was 3 years older than me. He was a great kid, with such a kind heart and a happy spirit. We were never super close; we didn’t talk a lot outside of family events. We didn’t know what was necessarily going on in each other’s lives, but we didn’t need to. He would hang out with me when the older kids didn’t want to. And when we got older, we would still hang out at family parties. We wouldn’t have to “catch up,” we could talk about whatever we wanted, play “I spy” with my grandma’s Christmas tree, listen and laugh at relatives being weird or acting crazy. I felt close to him because he was like a friend that you can sit down and spend time with after months or years, and it’s like nothing has changed.

The news that he died was shocking. But the idea that he had taken his life, was unbelievable. He was such a happy person. He just went to Grandma’s house wearing a panda head to cheer her up on Halloween because she wasn’t getting very many trick-or-treaters. He had just cleaned out her gutters the day before and left her a note because she was napping. He even bought tickets for this Polish dinner at their church for Friday night. He was always smiling, always making jokes, always going out of his way to help and make others happy – people always said he and I were similar in that way. He was a Catholic, by choice – his parents didn’t raise him Catholic, but he asked our grandma to take him to church and have him baptized and confirmed when he was in high school – and Catholics believe that suicide is an unforgivable sin. None of this made any sense. How could he be gone and how could he have done this?

I still don't have answers to those questions, and I don't think I ever will. When I talk to friends, family, or even therapists about this, and I say how it's so hard for me to accept because he was such a happy and life-loving person, I'm told things like "sometimes the most depressed people seem the happiest," "well think about Robin Williams, nobody could believe he killed himself for the same reasons," or my personal favorite "no one could've known." None of that makes it better. None of that brings him back, and none of it helps me accept it any more. I wasn't getting much help from anyone else in trying to understand this tragedy, and it was something that impacted me emotionally way longer than anyone could have expected.

As time went by, I started realizing that I wasn't really hung up on losing my cousin – I had grieved him, and at times I still get sad because he's gone, but I've accepted it - I was hung up on the fact that something SO UNEXPECTED could happen. I had been grieving the potential of losing my sister for the last 3 years, which is hard and emotionally draining, but it means that when she is gone it's at least expected. Sometimes it's hard to explain, so bear with me. I never expected to have to expect to lose my sister – her diagnosis was unexpected, but now losing her is not going to be. But losing my cousin was unexpected. I didn't have time to say goodbye or to cherish the moments I had before he left. I didn't even get to reflect on the good times with him before he was just gone. It was just out of nowhere. I realized that what people were telling me, that "no one could've known," wasn't comforting because that's exactly what was upsetting me. I couldn't have known ahead of time and I didn't know ahead of time. It's scary to have unexpected tragedies happen. It leads you to worry about what else will happen, or if the same thing could happen again. It makes you scared of the future, and that is a crippling feeling.

Again, I'm not an expert. I'm not a therapist or a wise guru, I'm just another hot mess trying to make some sense of my life. And I'm still working on making meaning out of this one. I was able to function for a while. I was able to distract myself from thinking about it, but it still took a toll on my mental health and compounded with other things that were happening.

Eventually, I couldn't function anymore. If I could redo the last year or two, I would have worked on this more instead of ignoring it. It's not healthy to suppress your problems, they'll only build and before you know it, you are failing nursing school and depressed and suicidal

yourself... but more on that later. It wasn't entirely my fault for not working through this problem before it became unbearable, life threw another fiery curveball at me and I was urged to work through that one first.

Think back to the idea of false invincibility that I brought up earlier, this feeling that my life was such a mess already, it couldn't get any worse. I became less cautious and took more risks, just like you are told that teenagers and young adults do. As a female college student, you hear all the time how there are resources for people who are sexually assaulted, you are given tips to keep yourself out of danger, you're told how you can help a friend if they are a victim, you're even taught that they aren't "victims" but "survivors," that it is never the survivor's fault and they shouldn't blame themselves. And you think, "okay, but that will never happen to me." Until it does. You've been in riskier situations after a night of drinking and you always made it out okay, no matter the bad decisions you made, so you'll be fine. Until you're not.

The story of my rape might be triggering, it might make you uncomfortable, or it might make you think that I'm a huge dumbass. I don't like talking about it, not because it was traumatizing, but because no matter how many people tell me it was NOT MY FAULT, I still know that I was being dumb. The only reason I'm going to tell you about it, is because I think that my story is unique in that it's not the classic story or example you hear, but I think that it is at the same time not unique in that I'm sure it could happen to someone else.

It started the night of my roommate's sorority formal. I had been drinking a lot. I wasn't 21 yet, so I stayed home drunk and by myself while my roommates, who were all 21+, went to the bars. What does one do when they're drunk and by themselves? They go on Tinder, of course. They talk to random guys expecting to eventually fall asleep because nobody is THAT interesting on Tinder, and they're drunk so sleep isn't far away. But wait, then one of these random guys talks about getting milkshakes that night. I said "that's not very safe, you're a stranger" but in my head thinking about how AMAZING a milkshake sounded at that moment. He asks, "so?" and I respond, "It's not safe to go somewhere alone with a stranger, especially when you're drunk." He says he'll bring his dog with, so you aren't alone... I check his Tinder photos and his dog is super cute, so I think, "a dog wouldn't let anything bad happen, AND no one would murder me in front of their dog." So I agree. I change out of my formal dress and

into baggy clothes, because I decided that that would be protection. Then I realize that the last time I went and got milkshakes with a guy, it was super awkward and miserable, so I took a few more shots before I went out the door.

He was nice and seemed normal. The dog was so cute and sweet. We got milkshakes and talked, and it was nice. We got back in his car and he asked if I wanted to drive around, the few shots were beginning to kick in, so I wasn't ready for bed and agreed. He said he was house-sitting this big house on all this property right outside of Muncie, if I wanted to see it. I like big houses, so I instantly said yes without thinking. But the farther we drove the weirder I felt about it, I even texted my friend to watch my location so that if I die, she knows where I am. I didn't die. We watched a movie at the house, he made me toast and gave me water because the extra drinking hit me harder and harder. I felt a little better and we ended up having sex. He took me back home. And I woke up in the morning thinking everything was fine. I mean the sex was pretty consensual, I was drunk which isn't the textbook definition of "consent," but it wasn't like I was trying to stop it. Plus it was a nice night, and he was really sweet and took care of me.

The next day he texted me all day, he wanted to see me again. He came over and we watched Netflix in my room while my roommates were downstairs playing with his puppy so we could be alone upstairs I guess. Everything was fine the night before, but quickly it wasn't fine anymore. He started talking about future plans, acting like we were in a relationship. He saw on the calendar in my room that my 21st birthday party was next weekend, and he asked what I wanted for my birthday. He said he'd get me flowers for my birthday and jewelry for Christmas. I told him he didn't need to, starting to get weirded out. He explained he wasn't in college, he worked at a factory or something, so with a grown-up job he could afford it. I let it go and just tried to watch the movie so that once it was over I'd tell him I was tired, and he should go. He made his move, as most guys do halfway through a Netflix movie. I wasn't surprised, but I did pull away and tell him I wasn't up for it. He let it go, but then tried again, I decided I'd make out with him because he was a good kisser so there wasn't any harm in it.

It was still all fine, until he was on top of me. He started taking my clothes off, and I told him I didn't want to do anything. I made an excuse that I didn't want to have sex since he didn't

have a condom. I figured that he would understand, because no guy would ever get mad about a girl declining unprotected sex. He was on top of me and said, "it's fine, relax," and kept going. I was in shock. I had never been in a situation like this. I couldn't believe what was happening. I didn't scream and I didn't struggle. It didn't feel like I was being raped.

Afterwards, he cuddled up to me and left after the movie was over. My head was spinning because what just happened didn't feel right, but my brain also was not registering in that moment that I had just been sexually assaulted. He texted me in the following days, acting very sweet, but weirdly acting like we were in love or something. It took me a few days to realize how uncomfortable it made me feel. I texted my roommate to come up to my room, I needed to talk. I had already felt uneasy about what had happened, and even told him over texts that what he did was not okay. He admitted to the whole thing over texts and apologized and begged me to give him another chance. I knew I wouldn't give him another chance, but it wasn't until I told my roommate what had happened that I realized the scary truth that it was rape. She comforted me, even though I wasn't crying.

You think of rape victims/survivors as being emotional and scared, someone obviously traumatized... but I wasn't, and I wouldn't really ever be. My roommate took me to the police station to file a report, which was hard and embarrassing, but I still didn't cry. The police told me it was too long since the assault took place for me to get a rape kit done at the ER. I called my mom and told her what happened and that I was scared because it was unprotected sex. I cried a little when I told my mom but only because I was embarrassed that I put myself in that situation and it sucked having to admit that to her. She told me to go to the health center, and when I went that Thursday afternoon, they sent me to the ER because, in fact, you can have a rape kit done within 5 days of the event. It took 10 hours for the whole process, so I didn't get home from the ER until 2am.

I had my last clinical of the semester that next day AND it was the day of my 21st birthday party. I went to clinical even though the Title IX representative told me I didn't have to. I tried to enjoy my last day at the nursing home, saying goodbye to all the little old people that I loved taking care of. When I got out of clinical, my other roommate who was in charge of planning my party told me she didn't get streamers, or decorations, or speakers, or the album

for my shot-book. On top of that, she was called in to work that night so she wouldn't be there when the party started. The friends that knew what had happened to me that week asked if I wanted to reschedule the party, but I was set on not letting this ruin my birthday or having fun.

I should've rescheduled anyway, because it was a disaster. I mean, some people had fun at the party, but I didn't. It wasn't the 21st birthday I expected. It was a week before finals, so not many of my own friends showed up, it was mostly my roommates' friends. I didn't really get that drunk or get through my 21 shots in my shot-book because usually there's one or two friends who are in charge of you for the night. I didn't have that, so no one knew how drunk I was or wasn't. I honestly waited to start having fun. It wasn't until my little showed up with her friends and we started dancing around midnight that I started having fun. Around 12:30 one of my roommates' friend unplugged the speaker and told me to go to bed, she was spending the night on our couch and wanted to go to sleep. That's the moment I started crying. I LOST IT. I was ugly crying like you couldn't believe. My friends who knew, thought I was finally crying about the rape, I think I even thought that too. But honestly? I was crying because this week and night was a freaking disaster. I was a huge hot mess once again. I was a hot mess when I was supposed to be a hot 21-year-old enjoying being young and getting drunk and making memories. I was crying because once again, this is not what I expected or wanted.

I've come to terms with the fact that my birthday that year sucked. Sure I didn't have the crazy story of my 21st birthday, blacking out and throwing up. But I had my own even crazier story. I decided that I can grow from this situation. I learned that if I have high expectations for a birthday party but don't want to plan it myself, I need to tell people what I expect instead of just hoping they'll know. I realized how WEIRD it was that I WANTED to throw up on my birthday.

I learned that it's okay to not be okay, to stay home from your last clinical, and to cancel your birthday party. I learned that even if you THINK you can get through it, you should ask yourself "sure, this is something I don't want to miss, but is this something that I want to JUST GET THROUGH?" The answer is probably no, because I learned that trying to just get through something you cared enough about to not want to miss, is worse than missing it all together.

The following semester was rough. I was trying to work through these traumatic things, trying to do well in nursing school, and I was drowning. My therapist wanted to work through my feelings about the rape – I said “my feelings are that it happened, there’s nothing I can do about that, and what’s done is done, and I won’t let it happen in the future. And that’s it.” She told me I was still in denial, that the trauma would catch up to me. I mean she was a little right, there are moments when I think about it and feel violated, or times when I go on a date and feel uncomfortable or worried what will happen, but none of that is trauma or causes me real anxiety. She was wrong in thinking that I needed to work through it right away. We all grieve in different ways, and I grieved and got over it pretty quickly. She wanted me to talk through it over and over so that I would be triggered, and the emotions I buried would come out. All that did was mess with my head more. It made me come up with reasons to be upset, things that I didn’t need to be anxious about. I started getting more and more depressed – I worried about when the grief process will finally start, like she said. I cried over the fear that no man would ever want me for anything more than sex. And I isolated myself from friends because I felt like that’s what a traumatized person is supposed to do. The truth is that I still really needed to work through the issues I had from my cousin’s suicide and rehashing the events of my rape while ignoring those other festering issues made everything worse.

I started failing my nursing classes. I missed assignments, I failed exams, I was late to clinical. I was this terrible student, a complete opposite of the girl I used to be in high school. I ended up having to withdraw from another nursing class because I was failing exams. I was starting to hit rock bottom.

A girl in my sorority asked me to go on a mission trip, and I figured that even if I’m not super religious anymore, I’m at rock bottom so what else do I have to lose? I went to Guatemala during spring break. And it was life changing, just like the cliché answer you get from your super Christian friend when you ask about their mission trip just out of politeness and you skeptically think “oh sure.” No, it was really life changing for me. I found comfort in my faith. I felt good and like I had a purpose for the first time in a long time. I was happier than I had been in what felt like forever. That trip was one of the highest highs of my life. But of course, it couldn’t last. I came back and I got through the rest of that semester.

I was so hopeful. Over the summer, I retook the nursing class I failed, and I did well in it. I thought that I was finally out of rock bottom, and senior year was going to be awesome and everything would be fine. I clung on to these same expectations, I focused on this desire to have the ideal college experience so much that I was ignoring that I was still spiraling. But it would soon become obvious, that in fact, I was still a hot mess.

2019-2020

Dear Hot Messes of the World,

A hot mess can find happiness amongst the mess!

Senior year is a year where things start falling into place. You're supposed to be getting more and more ready to step out into the real world and be a grown-up. My senior year of high school was like that. I had plans and goals, I was ready to take on college, ready to be more of a grown up. So it's not crazy to expect that senior year of college I would be ready and prepared and have my life a little bit together. Except that I'm a hot mess, and my life is messy too.

I started senior year knowing that I was still a semester behind in the nursing program, so the earliest I could graduate was July 2020. I had coped with the fact that I wouldn't graduate in 4 years like I had expected to. After doing well in nursing over the summer, I truly felt confident that I would be fine in the program from then on. But as classes started, sorority recruitment came and went, and I was struggling again. I was struggling emotionally – I spent entire days sleeping or watching Netflix. I didn't want to do anything, I wouldn't even make myself food, I'd rather stay in my bed than eat food – which if you knew me or how much I love food, you'd know how much of a red flag that is. I was struggling so badly that I wasn't entirely aware that I was struggling.

I didn't know how bad I was until one Friday night, after a hard week, I had plans to go out with friends and do the Ball State tradition of Watermelon Bust with girls from my sorority, and it was going to be a great weekend. But those plans started unravelling. Friends bailed on our plans and I didn't have anyone to go out with. The thing with depression and anxiety together is that when you start being anxious about something like plans falling through when you're already depressed and hanging by a thread, you cannot think, or even feel, rationally. So my reaction to my plans falling through might seem intensely dramatic – but I promised that I would be honest with you. I was upset about a lot of things and was so depressed. This weekend was the light at the end of the tunnel, so when it didn't work out the way I wanted, I fell apart. That Friday night was the night I almost killed myself.

I have had suicidal thoughts before when things had been bad, but they weren't really suicidal as much as thoughts of defeat – “I wanna go to sleep and not wake up for like a month”

or “I can’t do this anymore, I can’t feel like this anymore, I don’t know what to do.” This was the first time my brain told me that I wanted to die. And even scarier, this was the first time I had a plan – I was going to take all of my antidepressants, ADHD prescription medication, allergy medication, and alcohol. I even got to the point where I held the bottles of medicine in my hands. That’s when I saw my phone light up because my dad was texting me “goodnight.” I remember looking at the bottles, then at the phone, then at the bottles, then at a picture on my wall of my sister, dad, and I, then at the bottles again. I remember without really thinking, I picked up the phone and I called my dad.

The hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life was to tell my dad, who is my best friend, that I wanted to kill myself and was moments from doing it. He started crying (which is rare for him) and was telling me to put the bottles down. His voice was shaking as he tried to get me to go to the hospital. I told him that I would never go to Ball Memorial, that I had been there during my psych clinical rotation and that I would be embarrassed, and I don’t think it would help. My parents had been through this when my brother was seventeen, and my dad agreed that Max was worse after going to the hospital – he was safe from hurting himself while he was in there, but his depression got worse after that. My dad was still so scared, he didn’t know what to do. He put my sister on the phone with me while he talked to my mom about what we should do. My sister calmed me down. Nicole always had a way with making everything all better. Since I was little, she was the only person who could help me with my ADHD and anxiety. Within minutes I was calm and felt safe with my thoughts again. My parents decided that for now, they were going to support my decision to not go to the hospital at that time, but they didn’t want me to be alone. They had me go wake my roommate up and hand her the phone while I ate some food. She got off the phone with them, took my medicine bottles and locked them in her car, and then sat with me the rest of the night and slept in my bed with me.

I was a happy child and a happy teenager, and I’d even say a happy all-around person. I thought I couldn’t be depressed if “happy and positive” is a part of my personality. I had been getting treated for depression for a few years now, but I didn’t really understand why because I didn’t think I was depressed. I never expected that I could feel so empty that the only option

that my brain saw was suicide. I never expected it, and that made it even scarier. In the days and weeks that followed, I felt weird. It's hard to describe it, but I felt like a ghost, like I was watching my life continuing on before me but like I wasn't really living it. I felt fragile - I wasn't not living my life because I didn't feel alive anymore, but because I was scared that life would break me again. I mean I was going to kill myself after Friday night plans fell through, what if a drive thru got my order wrong or I broke a nail? How would I react to that?

Mental Illness is hard, it's isolating, and it's confusing. It's frustrating for the people who love and care about you, because they don't know how to help you. And you don't even know how they could help; you barely know how to help yourself. The only thing that I could do at that time, was keep pushing on and make it to fall break in a few weeks. I could come home and talk through things with my parents, and we could figure out our next steps.

Well that was easier said than done, I failed the second exam of the semester and was at risk of failing yet another nursing class. The exam was the day before fall break, so I just gathered my stuff and came home. Fall break was the light at the end of the tunnel, I just had to get home at the very least, and we would figure it all out. Well, the first night I was home, I learned that my sister had a new tumor in her brain. This was the moment we all knew was coming for the last 3.5 years, but that preparation didn't help me like I thought it would. Here I was, already depressed, already struggling, and now my sister is going to start dying? How could God (or the universe or whatever you believe in) do this to me? Well, because I'm a hot mess, of course.

Fall break came and went. My parents had signed me up for online therapy and that was really helpful, I haven't had any suicidal thoughts since that night. We had some ideas to help me do better in school, but first I needed to meet with my professors and the head of the department to see what I should do. That meeting went devastatingly well. I had anticipated what they would say – that with everything I had going on, the best option is to withdraw from this class. This was what my parents wanted too, because if I was already struggling so bad with my depression, I would be suffering through the rest of the semester and that could be dangerous for me. I did not like the idea because it meant I wouldn't graduate for another year then, and I just wanted to be home with my family. During the meeting, we talked about my

options in the long-term – continue through the program, take a semester or year off and come back to Muncie to finish, transfer to another school, or change my major. And we came up with a combination of the last two.

Transferring nursing programs is not really a thing. No nursing program would count the 3 semesters of work I had already done. But the first 2 options weren't appealing to me either, I liked it here in Muncie but as a temporary 4-year kind of thing while my friends were still here, I didn't want to spend any more time here than necessary. I knew that it would suck to start completely over and transfer, like the 3.5 years I had already done at Ball State never happened or didn't matter. So, I chose to graduate with a Bachelor's in General Studies from Ball State in May 2020, and then attend Loyola University's accelerated second Bachelor's in Nursing program in Fall of 2020. Their program is 4 consecutive semesters, so I'll graduate December 2021 as a registered nurse, which isn't much longer than if I tried out either of my other two options of staying at Ball State. With this option, I will have a degree to show for the last 4 years in good ol' Muncie, Indiana AND I will get to walk across the stage and graduate in the quad with all my friends.

This decision was hard and scary. I had to let go of the expectations that I clung desperately to. It took a huge leap of faith, but I did it. And words cannot explain how truly glad I am that I did. I was instantly a lot happier than I was the week before. I felt like I could breathe again, like I could LIVE again. Now, I'm not saying that dropping out cured me of my hot mess-ness, and it certainly did not resolve the problems I was having concerning my mental health. But what it did do, is give me the time and energy to start working on those things and start doing the things that make me happy again. I was able to volunteer again, go out with my friends without feeling guilty for not studying, go on lunch dates, exercise, journal, read a book for fun.

After seeing how much happier I was after letting go of my expectations, I started to think more and more if this was like an actual thing. And honestly, it inspired me to write this. So many of the hardest moments in college would've been one-hundred times easier if I wasn't worried about life going exactly the way I wanted it to. People talk about how they just go with the flow, or they tell you to "just relax and not care or worry." But they don't realize what it

feels like to be a mess, or to have anxiety. They don't think that I've already tried just not caring and just going with the flow. It's so hard to get to a place where you can actually just accept what life is throwing at you. I don't know if it is something that comes with age, or with life experiences. But if it is the latter, now you've read through some of the experiences that lead me to where I am at – a little closer to accepting that expectations rarely align with reality.

Conclusion

Dear Hot Messes of the World,

Embrace the mess.

Here we are at the end of this adventure. This is the end of my college experience, and once again life is not going as expected. COVID-19 tearing apart my last semester at Ball State is honestly the best example for this thesis that I could have possibly come up with. Of course no one expects that there will be a pandemic that entirely halts all social life and special events across the globe – except that island in India that no one has visited without getting killed by the native tribe in like hundreds of years, I’m sure they’re safe and living it up all normal like.

I’m writing this from during the quarantine, so if you are reading this 100 years later for some god forsaken reason, this could be like an ancient artifact of what life was like in 2020. Anyway, quarantine is not how I wanted my senior year to go, but it’s also not as bad as you’d think. Yes, I don’t get to transition to alum in my sorority with the special “senior tea” where everyone honors us, or go to my last sorority formal that I already had the dress for, or go to the frat formal that I finally had someone ask me to, or get to graduate with all of my friends at commencement in the quad. But I also didn’t have to say those hard goodbyes, I got to do them over Facetime. I have a valid excuse for being lazy besides “senioritis.” I get to finish my classes online wearing sweatpants. It is hard, having ADHD to stay focused and on-track with assignments, and it sucks being away from my friends. But it could be worse.

What I’m saying is, although I’m still a hot mess and I still get upset when my plans get ruined, I have been able to come to term with things a lot faster than I ever have in my life. The truth is, expectations and reality are rarely the same, if ever. And the sooner you can accept that the better. Of course, as you’ve noticed from my story, that acceptance is a lot harder to do than some people might think. I don’t have the scientific answers to happiness, or a cure-all to anxiety or disappointment. What I do have is my hot mess of a story, and hopefully you other hot messes of the world can appreciate it too.